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News Release



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New Restrictions to Limit Big Cat Trade, Transport

The Captive Wildlife Safety Act, a law designed to address concerns about public safety amid growing private ownership of big cats in the United States, moved a step closer to implementation today as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service published final regulations relating to the law in the Federal Register. The law becomes effective September 17, 2007.

Enacted late in 2003, this law makes it illegal to move certain types of live big cats across State lines or U.S. borders. Cats covered by the Act include lions, tigers, leopards, snow leopards, clouded leopards, jaguars, cheetahs, and cougars; all subspecies of these species; and hybrid combinations of these species.

Specifically, the Act prohibits anyone from importing or exporting these animals; selling or buying them through interstate commerce; transporting them across State lines; and receiving or acquiring them if the animals are moved from one State to another. The law applies to all individuals of these species of cats regardless of when they were acquired and to all persons and entities except those identified as exempt.

The statute and Service regulations provide exemptions for zoos, circuses, researchers, transporters, and others licensed or registered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture under the Animal Welfare Act. State colleges, universities and agencies and State-licensed wildlife rehabilitators and veterinarians are also exempt as are wildlife sanctuaries meeting specific criteria.

The statute required the Service to develop regulations describing exempt entities before prohibitions would take effect. The new regulations also identify, by scientific name, the big cat species that are covered; define terms used in the Act to help the public understand it; outline prohibitions in an easily accessible format; and establish recordkeeping requirements for exempt wildlife sanctuaries.

Penalties for violating the Captive Wildlife Safety Act and its regulations are based on the nature of the offense. Violations involving any import or export or the interstate sale or purchase of specimens worth more than \$350 constitute a felony punishable by a prison term of up to five years and a fine of up to \$250,000 for an individual and \$500,000 for an organization. Other violations would be misdemeanors involving lesser penalties.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 97-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 547 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resource offices and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance program, which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

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